

dth: 33px; border-collapse: collapse;" border="0" cellspacing="0" cellpadding="0" bordercolor="0" border="0" style="border: 1px solid black;"> Culture of
hypocrisy which existed during the Bush era continues to thrive in the US today [EPA]

Every so often, a convergence occurs between a few ostensibly unrelated events in the endless swirl of news stories, polemics and propaganda, spin and advertising that make up the media sphere today.

Like the noonday sun, they pierce a hole through the fog of information that normally obscures the core dynamics behind the larger political-economic system's smooth functioning.

But unlike the sun shining through the storm clouds, this opening is not immediately obvious, and can easily be missed if one does not know where and how to look. In fact, it is more like a three-dimensional worm hole through political space, viewable if one folds specific coordinates over each other in just the right way.

In this case, the coordinates correspond to three levels of political discourse - military, media and cultural - whose harmonious interaction is crucial to the larger functioning of the system.

The brief moment of clarity reminds us of the crucial role played by one of the most subtle yet damning of human vices - hypocrisy - in sustaining the problems confronting the US, and most other global powers for that matter.

Hypocrisy laid bare

Hypocrisy has always been an important denomination of political currency, but today it has seemingly become the coin of the realm.

One could easily ascribe it to the reascending of right-wing politics in the US and Europe, which is almost always accompanied by a politics of hypocrisy, since as a rule such politics involves the use of populist rhetoric to concentrate a country's wealth and resources in the hands of ever fewer people.

In the US, the vitriolic Republican-corporate attacks on healthcare and other much needed reforms in the name of protecting the rights of individual citizens, reflect an increasingly toxic political culture and the power of the right to manipulate deep-seated fears and prejudice for its own ends.

However, the continuities in US foreign policy between the Obama and Bush administrations reflect a more systemic hypocrisy whose negative consequences have global implications.

The US - like great powers before it - has long declared its intention to support freedom, democracy and progress while pursuing policies that encourage, or even demand, their opposite.

Not surprisingly, it has also turned a blind eye to its allies' or clients' hypocrisies: Israel declaring its desire for peace while intensifying occupation, Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan, promising to fight corruption while rigging elections and placing family members in crucial positions.

Then you have this or that Arab leader pledging democratic reform while continuing to arrest and abuse citizens - until the disconnect between words and deeds threatens core American interests.

With enemies, such as Iraq (under Saddam Hussein) or Iran today, hypocrisy is assumed, even when evidence suggests that at crucial moments they might actually be telling the truth.

But who's looking?

Whether friend or foe, it is the people who suffer from a geopolitics grounded in hypocrisy.

The hardships of the present economic downturn in the US only hint at the pain caused to the peoples of the developing world, who bear the brunt of the full power of the economic and political interests lying beneath the hypocrisy of the global powers and their leaders alike.

Has the US
healthcare
debate
created an
increasingly
toxic
political
culture?
[AFP]

And these consequences are often not just painful, but deadly.

Two generations ago in Southeast Asia the death toll reached into the millions, today in Iraq and Afghanistan the toll is in the hundreds of thousands of dead and injured. But the suffering rarely makes headlines, unless it can produce images that are too powerful to ignore.

The Abu Ghraib scandal produced one such moment, although its quick dissipation (perhaps owing to an innate sense among many Americans that the hypocrisy they revealed was ultimately not merely that of the Bush administration, but the country as a whole) ensured that the Bush administration and Republican-controlled Congress paid no price for the activities they revealed.

The most recent opening in the haze of media and political hypocrisy began with the near simultaneous revelations of civilian deaths at the hands of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The now ubiquitous Wikileaks video footage of soldiers firing on Reuter's photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen, his colleague Saeed Chmagh, and several other civilians in Baghdad in July 2007 was equalled in graphic power by the accusations that in February 2010, US special forces personnel had not only killed two pregnant women along with a teenage girl and two local officials in Khataba, Afghanistan, but carved the bullets out of the bodies to remove evidence of their responsibility for the deaths.

The hypocrisy of the official responses has been glaringly on display.

When asked whether the Wikileaks video would hurt America's image, Robert Gates, the US defence secretary, said it would not, precisely because what the video really showed was the fog of war.

"These people were operating in split-second situations And, you know, we've investigated it very thoroughly It should not have any lasting consequences."

'Dead bastards'

Hypocrisy is often accompanied by arrogance.

Gates assumes that scenes of US soldiers blithely calling the victims "dead bastards," laughing, looking for an excuse to finish off an unarmed victim, and blaming other victims for "bringing their kids into a battle" will "not have any lasting consequences".

Consequences for whom, one might ask.

Perhaps Gates understands that most Iraqis and Afghans have long ago stopped believing US rhetoric about supporting democracy and protecting civilian lives.

Whether consciously or not, it seems Gates was considering public opinion in the US, not in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Indeed, if we look behind his, and the soldiers', words we are reminded that it is extremely difficult to shoot people who do not present an immediate and clear threat unless you have first been desensitised by intense ideological preparation that dehumanises the occupied people.

As in Vietnam, this dehumanisation means that Iraqis and Afghan civilian deaths are easily accepted as mere collateral damage, since Americans have no connection to or sympathy for the peoples they have been occupying for most of the last decade.

The latest polls show that "voters are very responsive where Democrats talk boldly about our foreign policy of taking it to the terrorists".

And so even as four more civilians were killed by US forces firing on a crowded bus a day after Gates' remarks,

■ In military footage released by Wikileaks, Iraqi fatalities were called "dead bastards" [AFP]

ATTACHMENTS
Americans show no signs of changing the "secondary status" that Iraq and Afghanistan presently hold in their political discourse.

That would demand recognition of the hypocrisy that enabled their relegation to such a low status in the first place, even at the cost of upward of a trillion dollars and the loss of thousands of American soldiers.

Worse, it would demand a reevaluation of the larger premises upon which the unending 'war on terror' is being fought and confronting the fact that in so many areas, Obama is entrenching rather than reversing the policies of his predecessor.

Of course, Afghans are far less tolerant of the disconnect between US rhetoric and reality.

The latest deaths caused a new round of bitter protests against the US occupation while Afghan military leaders increasingly treat US promises to protect and respect civilians as meaningless and, like Karzai, even threaten to join the Taliban.

Tariq Ramadan's return

Gates' remarks and the more unscripted real-time comments of the soldiers he was defending exist in a media sphere that has failed miserably to educate the American public about the motivations behind and present-day realities of the Iraq and Afghan invasions and occupations.

Underlying this dynamic is a shared arrogance and hypocrisy by leading American commentators, especially those often portrayed as politically liberal or moderate, that was crucial to laying the groundwork for public acceptance of the rationale for going to war and continuing the occupations despite the numerous and manifest contradictions between them and the realities on the ground.

The process by which this dynamic proceeds was revealed last week in the coverage of the return of Swiss Muslim theologian Tariq Ramadan to the US for a speaking tour, six years after he was banned from entering the country by the Bush administration.

Debating with Packer

Specifically, Ramadan's first event in the US was a forum on "secular Islam and democracy" held in New York, where he debated *New Yorker* writer George Packer.

Packer chose not to engage Ramadan, who has spent over a decade working to forge a consensus among European Muslims on the need for non-violence and to produce identities that can be both fully Muslim and Western, on the issues related to the forum's title.

Rather, while declaring that he was "not asking you to repudiate your grandfather [Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood]," he demanded that Ramadan account for and renounce anti-Semitic remarks made by al-Banna well over half a century ago.

At a time when the contemporary Muslim Brotherhood is engaged in an unprecedented generational shift in ideology and attitudes, Packer honed in his criticism of Ramadan for refusing to acknowledge that "his grandfather and the Muslim Brotherhood in its origins were characterised by anti-Semitic or totalitarian views".

Although he has held prestigious appointments at Oxford as well as Notre Dame and the University of Geneva, Packer argues that Ramadan "is not a philosopher, or an original thinker".

He provides no criteria for this judgement, but that is likely because he assumes that most readers will accept at face value that leading thinkers from the Muslim world are rarely original or philosophic - a code word for reasonable and rational, presumably like Americans and Europeans.

 Tariq Ramadan has been lauded by Haaretz for repudiating anti-Semitism [EPA]

For his part, Packer would seem to fit neither characterisation, the term, never mind ideology of "Islamophobia" he accused al-Banna of harbouring was not even in use when the Brotherhood was founded or first rose to prominence.

'Rotten foundations'

Packer concludes that however well-meaning his bridge-building, Ramadan's hope of reconciling Islamic and Western culture is built on "rotten foundations," namely the history and ideology of the Brotherhood.

How does he know this? Clearly not by reading Ramadan's numerous books, which are clearly opposed to most of the basic tenets of the Brotherhood during his grandfather's day.

Instead, in good Orientalist fashion, Packer refers to second-hand accusations against Ramadan made by journalist Paul Berman, who is about to publish a book accusing Ramadan of being a propagandist for Islamist extremism.

Berman's last foray into the subject of Islam was *Terror and Liberalism*, which was celebrated in the mainstream media for, among other things, arguing that Sayyid Qutb was the ideological godfather of al-Qaeda - which scholars had been discussing for years before his "discovery" - and that political Islamist movements are ultimately "irrational" and therefore cannot be reasoned with.

Most scholarly reviews by those who actually know the region and its languages were largely critical of Berman's arguments.

US view of Muslims

Ramadan could have responded to Packer's constant pressure for him to denounce his grandfather by demanding that Packer renounce his support for the US invasion of Iraq, or his inaccurate and journalistically irresponsible dismissal of those who opposed the war - which included Ramadan - as fringe, knee-jerk and "doctrinaire" leftists who lacked any "understanding" of the region.

Perhaps he was being polite, or was too jet-lagged to respond in kind to attacks that had nothing to do with his own thinking (indeed, Ramadan has condemned anti-Semitism so many times that he was praised for doing so by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*).

Ultimately, however, it is not Ramadan's refusal to engage Packer at a lower level of discourse that is important; it is the assumption by Packer, no doubt borne out by long experience, that his arguments as to the rotten foundation and ultimately irrational basis of Ramadan's thinking will be accepted in the media sphere, since they accord so well with the general view of Muslim intellectual capabilities and motives.

Tiger Woods

While Packer and Ramadan debated in New York City, Tiger Woods was preparing for his return to competitive golf at the Master's tournament that would begin later in the week.

Of all the sins Woods has been accused of, perhaps the most ubiquitous was his hypocrisy - creating a persona based on steely calm, control, integrity, and determination while in reality his private life was based on deceit and violating the trust of his family and fans.

This is no doubt a valid criticism, but by the time the first round began on Thursday most people were far more interested in what Tiger would do on the golf course than what he had done off the links.

Of course, no one could say this openly. And so Billy Payne, the chair of the Masters tournament, dutifully criticised Woods, stating that he "disappointed all of us" with his numerous marital infidelities.

Of course, neither he nor any of the journalists present thought it worth mentioning that Augusta National remains one of the few golf clubs that refuses to admit women as players. Apparently no one considered it the least bit hypocritical

Woods' fall mirrors the corruptive hypocrisy in the US today [AFP]

for a club that does not consider women worthy of membership to criticise a member and a champion who treats women as unworthy of consideration beyond their sex.

With so much money riding on Woods' return to the spotlight, his main endorser, Nike, also decided it had to make a bold statement criticising Woods, while at the same time reaffirming both his iconic status and the possibility of redemption.

So it aired a commercial that saw Woods staring blankly into the camera while his late father, Earl, asked him from the grave about what he was thinking and what he had learnt.

That a company such as Nike, whose alleged record of systematic mistreatment of workers and use of child labour has been heavily criticised around the world, determined that the ghost of Woods' father could help cleanse him, and the company, of their sins, is one of the more egregious examples of corporate hypocrisy in some time.

Hypocrisy's victory

But the reality is they are probably right. Everyone is clearly anxious to get back to the way it was, and by the time Woods walked toward the 18th green on Sunday he was smiling and shaking hands with his course partner for the day, K.J. Choi, while receiving a standing ovation from the crowd.

No doubt most of those in attendance and watching on television will be happy to see Woods resume his golfing prowess. After all, no public figure better symbolised the power, purpose and determination of the US in the 2000s.

His fall from grace in many ways mirrored America's - the gleaming steel surface and sunny gaze turned out to be, if not quite rotten, then in need of major repair.

The blow-back of Woods' behaviour is being played out in front of the world. So is that of US policy. With enough reflection and determination, one can hope that Woods will rise above the hypocrisy that apparently has defined much of his professional and personal life.

But it is much harder for countries to do this, as it demands not one, but millions of people, from political leaders and commentators to ordinary citizens, to reflect deeply and honestly on what brought them to their present situation.

Perhaps if the fog remains lifted for long enough, one may be able to grasp the beginnings of the process of moving away from political and media cultures based on hypocrisy, greed and power and toward cultures that actually support peace, freedom and dignity.

Mark LeVine is currently visiting professor at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University, Sweden. His books include Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam and Impossible Peace: Israel/Palestine Since 1989.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.

Source: Al Jazeera

Topics in this article
People

Country

City

Organisation

- | | | | |
|------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| • <u>Tariq Ramadan</u> | • <u>United States</u> | • <u>New York City</u> | • <u>Muslim Brotherhood</u> |
| • <u>Tiger Woods</u> | • <u>Iraq</u> | • <u>New York</u> | • <u>Bush administration</u> |
| • <u>George Packer</u> | • <u>Afghanistan</u> | • <u>Oxford</u> | • <u>Notre Dame University</u> |
| • <u>Robert Gates</u> | • <u>Islamic Republic of</u> | | • <u>Environmental</u> |
| • <u>Earl</u> | <u>Iran</u> | | <u>Protection Agency</u> |

- ATTACHMENTS
- [Barack Obama](#)
 - [Paul Berman](#)
 - [Hassan al-Banna](#)
 - [Nasir Noor-Eldeen](#)
 - [Sayyid Qutb](#)
 - [Hamid Karzai](#)
 - [Mark LeVine](#)
 - [Billy Payne](#)
 - [Bush](#)
 - [Saeed Chmagh](#)
- [Vietnam](#)
 - [Israel](#)

FOCUS/LES

- [Congress](#)
- [al-Qaeda](#)
- [University of Geneva](#)
- [Taliban](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS



[Email article](#)



[Print article](#)



[Send feedback](#)



[Share article](#)

Top News

[Ash plume threatens more air chaos](#)

[Poland remembers air crash victims](#)

[Deaths reported in Pakistan blasts](#)

[China quake death toll rises](#)

[Iran calls for new nuclear body](#)

FOCUS News

[Will UK vote change EU relations?](#)

['PM should be acceptable to all'](#)

[Palestinians mark Prisoners Day](#)

[Bhutto's disappearing legacy](#)

[Sudan through the eyes of al-Turabi](#)

Most Emailed

[Hypocrisy and the end of empires](#)

[Palestinian PM blasts](#)

[Israel ID law](#)

[Israeli order raises eviction risk](#)

[Zimbabwe - State of Denial](#)

[Goldstone banned by SA Zionists](#)

[Al Jazeera English on Facebook](#)

WATCH NOW
FRONT PAGE
BLOGS
FOCUS
SPORT
PROGRAMMES

AFRICA
AMERICAS
ASIA-PACIFIC
CENTRAL/S. ASIA
EUROPE
MIDDLE EAST

SEARCH
ABOUT US
PODCASTS
MOBILE
ARABIC
RSS

